

THE MOSTEST

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I am a member of a club called the London Scrabble League. The club meets once a fortnight on a regular basis, and all members are welcome at these meetings. Between regular meetings, members often get together in each other's homes in groups of two, four or six to play a few games of Scrabble. Our dictionary of authority is Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary. We have various house rules about which words are and are not allowable. All nouns are assumed to be pluralizable unless otherwise indicated; all verb forms ending in -S, -ED and -ING are allowed unless otherwise indicated. Comparative and superlative adjectives are allowed if the base adjective or adverb (technically known as the "positive") is one syllable long or if they sound acceptable. For example, we have allowed REDDER, GREENEST, WINDIEST and SILLIER, but not FACILER, NOTABLEST, UNKINDLIEST and DEMENTEDEST. Obviously, such a rule is open to debate, discussion or argument -- call it what you will; recently we had arguments over SECUREST, TOWNIER and WINGIEST (the adjectives SECURE, TOWNY and WINGY are all in Chambers). How can any of these be ruled on without a watertight rule? I would argue that all three are acceptable, but I am certainly in a minority within the London Scrabble League.

In an attempt to see if some sort of workable rule could be formulated, I decided to examine the comparative and superlative forms of various adjectives listed in different dictionaries. I first examined Webster's Eighth New Collegiate, published in 1973. On page 13a:

"The comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs are shown in this dictionary when suffixation brings about a doubling of a final consonant or an elision of a final -E or a change of final -Y to -I-, when the word ends in -EY, when the inflection is irregular, and when there are variant inflected forms ... The inclusion of inflected forms in -ER and -EST at adjective and adverb entries means nothing more about the use of MORE and MOST with these adjectives and adverbs than that their comparative and superlative degrees may be expressed in either way: LAZIER or MORE LAZY; LAZIEST or MOST LAZY. At a few adjective entries only the superlative form is shown ... The absence of the comparative indicates that there is no evidence of its use."

What all of this means is that the editors of the New Collegiate are not going to give a general rule to describe how a particular comparative

or superlative is formed. All they are doing is recording -ER and -EST forms where their existence has been ascertained. The editors will describe but not prescribe. Let's look at some of the comparatives and superlatives that do appear in the New Collegiate:

bare, barer, barest	ill, worse, worst
comely, comelier, comeliest	kindly, kindlier, kindest
early, earlier, earliest	long, longer, longest
good, better, best	mere, -----, merest
heavy, heavier, heaviest	red, redder, reddest
homey, homier, homiest	well, better, best

The second dictionary I examined was Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Edition, published in 1934. On page xcv:

"The comparative and superlative forms of adjectives are given if irregular, if there is doubt about spelling, and often if they are formed by adding -ER and -EST. They are not given when formed by prefixing MORE and MOST."

At the entry for the verb COMPARE, the dictionary says this:

"Most adjectives of one syllable, those of two syllables ending in -ER, -LE, -OW or -Y after a consonant, many adjectives of two syllables with stress on the second, and common adverbs that are identical in form with the adjectives, are usually compared by affixing -ER and -EST to the positive form . . . Other adjectives of more than one syllable and most adverbs are usually compared by using MORE and MOST before the positive. Some adjectives forming a comparative only with MORE, especially those ending in -ABLE, -ED, -FUL, -ID, -ING, admit of a superlative in -EST. The choice between the two methods is largely a matter of euphony, rhythm and rhetorical effectiveness, except that comparison with MORE and MOST is preferred in the literary style and requisite with certain exclusively literary words, whereas the colloquial style prefers terminal comparison. Such compound adjectives as KIND-HEARTED, HIGH-MINDED take -ER and -EST on the first element when this keeps a distinct, literal sense and is commonly so compared as a separate adjunct (a kinderhearted aunt); otherwise they take MORE and MOST (a more high-minded policy). Double comparatives were common among Elizabethan writers and for some time later (more brighter, more dearer)."

Hopefully, that's all fairly self-explanatory. The length of the quote is in line with the Second Edition's generally encyclopedic nature. After all that, let's look at some of the comparatives and superlatives listed in the Second Edition:

blue, bluer, bluest	dry, drier, driest
breathy, breathier, breathiest	empty, emptier, emptiest

full, fuller, fullest	open, opener, openest
greeny, greenier, greeniest	polite, politer, politest
horsy, horsier, horsiest	stringy, stringier, stringiest
lousy, lousier, lousiest	sublime, sublimer, sublimest
nearly, more nearly, most nearly	Tory, -----, Toriest(3)
nearlier(1), nearest(1)	upper, -----, upperest
often, oftener, oftenest	zippy, zippier, zippiest
only, -----, onliest(2)	-----, further, furthest

The superscript numbers are (1) rare, (2) dialect or poetic intensive, and (3) occasional superlative. Note that the positive of further and furthest could not be found. Can readers find more peculiar comparative and superlatives in the Second Edition? Interestingly, this dictionary lists HURTINGEST and OTHEREST as main entries. The former is a dialect adjective meaning "most painful" and the latter means "most unlike".

After the Second Edition, I examined Webster's Third New International, published in 1961. On pages 17a-18a:

"All adjectives and adverbs that have comparatives and superlatives with the suffixes -ER and -EST have these forms explicitly or implicitly shown in this dictionary. They are written out in full ... when they are irregular or when they double a final consonant ... When they are formed by the simple addition of -ER and -EST with no change except dropping of final -E or changing of final -Y to -I-, these forms are indicated by -ER/-EST ... Comparatives and superlatives are usually omitted at compounds containing a constituent element whose inflection is shown at its own place ... Showing -ER and -EST forms does not imply anything more about the use of MORE and MOST with a simple adjective or adverb than that the comparative and superlative degrees can often be expressed in either way (luckier or more lucky, smoothest or most smooth)."

Again, note the usual Websterian statement about not implying anything about MORE and MOST just by showing the -ER and -EST forms. Description and not prescription again! Anyway, some examples of the Third Edition's comparatives and superlatives might be interesting:

acute, acuter(1), acutest(1)	damned, damner(1),
bad, worse, worst	damn(e)dest
badder(1), baddest(1)	excellent, excellenter(1),
worse(1), -----	excellentest(1)
beastly, beastlier, beastliest	foolish, foolisher(1),
beautiful, beautifuler,	foolishest(1)
beautifullest	handsome, handsomer(3),
cheerful, cheerfuller(1),	handsomest(3)
cheerfullest(1)	homely, homelier, homeliest
complete, completer(2),	ill, worse, worst
completest(2)	iller(1), illest(1)
curious, curiouiser(1),	worse(4), -----
curiousest(1)	

joyful, joyfuller(1), joyfullest(1)	proper, properer(1), properest(1)
just, juster(2), justest(2)	purple, purpler(1), purplest(1)
left, lefter(1), leftest(1)	remote, remoter(2), remotest(2)
less, lesser, least	right, righter(1), rightest(1)
like, liker(1), likest(1)	spindly, spindlier, spindliest
mere, merer, merest	splendid, splendor(2), splendidest(2)
modern, moderner(2), modernest(2)	strawy, strawier, strawiest
modest, modester(1), modestest(1)	teentsy, teentsier, teentsiest
oft, offer(1), oftest(1)	towny, townier, towniest
oofy, oofier, oofiest	trembly, trembler, trembliest
orangy, orangier(1), orangiest(1)	unique, uniquer(1), uniquest(1)
perfect, perfecter(1), perfectest(1)	wingy, wingier, wingiest
pinky, pinkier, pinkiest	youthy, youthier, youthiest
priestly, priestlier, priestliest	

The superscript numbers are (1) sometimes, (2) often, (3) usually, and (4) substandard. A close examination of Webster's Third on the reader's part will reveal many more odd and apparently strained comparatives and superlatives.

Interestingly, a check of the main entry -ER in this dictionary shows the word GENTLIER; yet at the main entry GENTLY, no indication at all is given of this particular comparative form. A check of the main entry -EST is even more interesting. For example, under -EST are the words BEGGARLIEST, CUSSDEST, FIGHTINGEST and LYINGEST. At the main entries BEGGARLY, CUSSSED, FIGHTING and LYING, no indication is given of the existence of these superlative forms. Webster's says that such words rarely if ever show a corresponding comparative formed by the addition of -ER. Strange!

The next dictionary I examined was the Oxford English Dictionary. At the entry MORE, the OED had this to say (p. 660, col. 2, C, 1b, 1c):

"With most adjectives and adverbs of more than one syllable, and with all of more than two syllables, this (prefixing of MORE) is the normal mode of forming the comparative. A few monosyllables (eg right, just) normally form their comparatives in this way instead of taking the suffix -ER ... (MORE is) often prefixed to monosyllabic and disyllabic adjectives and adverbs which have otherwise a regular comparative in -ER; as more true, more busy, more often = truer, busier, oftener. By modern writers, this alternative form is used (1) for special emphasis or clearness; (2) to preserve a balance of phrase when other comparatives with MORE occur in the context; (3) to qualify the whole predicate rather than the single adjective or adverb."

At the entry MOST, the OED refers the reader to MORE for the con-

ditions under which MOST is used. These, presumably, are meant to correspond exactly with those for MORE, stated above. A check of the main entry -ER in the OED reveals a number of interesting comparatives. For example, all of the following are mentioned: EMINENTER, SLAVISHER, SELDOMER, EASILIER, and KEENLIER. According to the OED, this way of forming comparatives is common in the works of Thomas Carlyle and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. (SELDOMER, if nowhere else, appears in Robert Browning's Bishop Blougram's Apology.)

Under the entries for MORE and MOST, the OED contains various quotations involving double comparatives and superlatives. Try these for size:

- "I should be glad ... to see a more equaller Balance among Sea-men, and their Imployers" (1669)
- "But Paris was to me More lovelier than all the world beside" (Tennyson, 1832)
- "I was always first in the most gallantest scrapes in my younger days" (Hardy, 1878)
- "My most extremest time of misery" (1881)

A similar double superlative appears in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar:

- "This was the most unkindest cut of all" (Act III, Scene i)

The OED lists WORSENER as a jocular or vulgar extension of WORSE. Indeed, one of the quotations used to support the word's existence contains the term MORE WORSENER, which looks like a quadruple comparative!

- "I have heard, good Sir, that every Body has a more betterer and a more worserer Side of the Face than the other" (1752)

The OED also lists WORSEST as a jocular and dialect refashioning of WORST. At first sight, though, the word appears to be the superlative form of a comparative!

After examining these four dictionaries, I decided to turn to Mencken's The American Language. Since this tends to report language as it is spoken and colloquially used, I hoped that there would be a wide range of interesting comparatives and superlatives. I wasn't let down. Among the items listed are the following ones:

beautifullest	kissingest	pathetiker
dancingest	laughingest	shootingest
goingest	leakingest	unjustest
high-steppingest	more better	wellest
idealer	more worse	womanishest
	outlandishest	

Note the rather odd comparative form of PATHETIC. Supplement One of The American Language reports a few more examples:

disappearingest
 he-est (as in "the he-est he-man she'd ever met")
 keyest (as in "California is going to be one of the keyest
 states in the Union")
 most workingest
 superer
 thriller

I mentioned earlier the OED reference to widespread use of the -ER comparatives in the works of Carlyle and Tennyson. An example from each should do to demonstrate how freely they formed such comparatives and superlatives. Carlyle uses INDISPUTABLEST in his Critical and Miscellaneous Essays in an essay on Chartism:

"Surely of all 'rights of man', this right of the ignorant man to be guided by the wiser, to be, gently or forcibly, held in the true course by him, is the indisputablest."

GENTLIER, already mentioned as appearing in Webster's Third at the entry -ER, crops up in Tennyson's The Lotos-Eaters:

"Music that gentlier on the spirit lies,
 Than tir'd eyelids upon tir'd eyes."

Recent examples of odd comparatives and superlatives are not difficult to find. In Mario Pei's Words in Sheep's Clothing, I ran across COFFEE-ER, PEANUTTIEST and MACARONIEST. The August 22, 1977 issue of Time magazine contains the sentence "... his three Virginia estates are still owned by Carters, the F-est of the FFV (First Families of Virginia)." The superlative F-EST does not appear in any dictionary -- Webster's Third doesn't even recognize F as an abbreviation of FIRST, though it does list FFV.

What does all this imply? To me, it indicates that comparatives and superlatives formed by the addition of -ER and -EST are rarer than most people would imagine. Indeed, I would go so far as to claim that in the right context any adjective or adverb can form an -ER comparative and an -EST superlative. Nothing could be obviouser!